Leo I the Thracian

(7 February 457 – 18 January 474)

EARLY LIFE

Leo was born in the Balkans, *ca.* 401, with different sources suggesting Thracia or Dacia. He married **Verina** before becoming emperor and they had three children. Ariadne was born before Leo became emperor; a second daughter Leontia was born in 457, and an anonymous son died at age five months in 463. Ariadne married Leo's eventual successor, **Zeno** while Leontia married the son of **Anthemius**, Marcian (named after **Anthemius'** father-in-law, the emperor **Marcian**). Leo's early career was military, and he had reached the rank of tribune in the regiment of the *Mattiarii* by 457. With the death of the emperor **Marcian** in 457, Leo was acclaimed emperor, probably with the support of the *magister militum* Aspar. This involved passing over **Marcian's** son-in-law, **Anthemius**. Leo's coronation on February 7, 457 is the first known involving the patriarch of Constantinople as well as the army and Senate. Leo died of dysentery aged 73, on 18 January, 474. He was succeeded by his son, Leo II

FOREIGN EVENTS

The peace treaty **Theodosius II** had made with the Sassanid Persians continued, leaving three major areas of concern in foreign policy, the Balkans, the Vandals and the Western Empire. With the disintegration of Attila's Empire, two Gothic groups, under Theoderic Strabo and Valamir, moved into the Balkans. Hostilities by Valamir in the western Balkans in 459 led to a negotiated peace with the Romans giving a small subsidy in exchange for peace and a hostage. At the same time, new barbarian groups, the Avars, Slavs and Bulgars, began filtering into the Transdanubian region. This in turn put increased pressure on Roman forces holding the Danube. Roman campaigning under Leo continued against the groups within and beyond the empire, especially against those Huns were under the leadership of Dengizech until his death in 469. The Goths led by Theoderic Strabo, who was appointed *magister militum praesentalis* in 473, were able to reach a dominant position in the eastern Balkans. His success threatened Valamir's Goths, now led by Valamir's son Theoderic, who moved east to challenge Strabo shortly before Leo died. Outside the Balkans, the Vandals were also a serious problem and in 468 a major Roman offensive was launched against them. This involved a naval expedition, supported by troops marching overland from Egypt and by western Roman troops under Marcellinus. The expedition was led by Leo's brother-in-law, **Basiliscus**, but turned out to be a disaster. As well as having little military effect, the expedition was tremendously expensive. Lastly, Leo had great influence in the west and was able to approve Ricimer's appointment of **Majorian** as western Emperor in 457. A decade later, 467 Leo sent **Anthemius**, who had married the daughter of the previous emperor, **Marcian**, as Emperor for the west. In 474, after the death of **Olybrius**, Leo sent an expedition to Italy under **Julius Nepos** to expel **Olybrius'** successor, **Glycerius**. There were also minor military problems in the Caucasus and Arabian regions.

DOMESTIC AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

After Leo's acclamation, the early domestic events concerned religion. In 460, the Alexandrians elected a monophysite patriarch, Timothy Aelurus ("the Cat"). After consulting bishops throughout the east, Leo removed Timothy by force, replacing him with Timothy Salofaciolus (the Greek means either "White-Hat" or "Wobble-Hat"). Constantinople was devastated by a major fire in 464. During the early part of Leo's reign, the *magister militum* Aspar was a prominent figure and probably instrumental in Leo's accession. This position was weakened when Aspar's son, Ardabur, was found guilty of treachery in 466 and dismissed from office. Leo then married his eldest daughter, Ariadne, to **Zeno**, probably in 466, Aspar, however, continued to be influential. In 467, the pagan Isocasius, a court official, was arrested and accused of being a Hellene (i.e. pagan). Although he was acquitted of the charges, this probably led to Leo's issuing a law in 468 which banned pagans from being lawyers. At this period probably occurred the creation of a new guard regiment, the *excubitores*, which in its early stages at least, was dominated by Isaurians. Although Aspar's dominance and been weakened, he was able to reassert himself after the failure of the Vandal expedition of 468 and prevailed upon Leo to declare his son, **Patricius**, as Caesar in 470. When the *magister militum* Anagastes revolted in Thrace in 470 negotiations with Leo revealed that the rebellion was encouraged by Ardabur. Leo eventually decided that Ardabur was too dangerous to let live. Aspar and

Ardabur and probably **Patricius** were murdered in the palace in 471, from which Leo acquired the nickname "Μακέλλης", meaning "the Butcher". Following the murders, there was a persecution of the Arians who had supported Aspar. For the rest of the reign, **Zeno**, as Leo's son-in-law, was the dominant figure.

REIGN

Scarcely anything of consequence is known to have occurred during Olybrius' brief reign. The most significant events to appear in the sources are the death of Ricimer and the elevation of Gundobad to the position of Patrician and Master of Soldiers. John of Antioch noted, "After Olybrius had become ruler over the Romans in this way, Ricimer departed life within thirty days [9 August], after vomiting much blood" (*fr.*209.2: Gordon trans., pp.122-123). Cassiodorus gave Ricimer a few more days of life: "He did not enjoy himself long after the perpetration of this crime, and he died after forty days [19 August]" ("*qui non diutius peracto scelere gloriatus post XL dies defunctus est*": *Chron*. 1293, s.a.472). The *Fasti vindobonenses priores* (no.607) establish the date of Ricimer's death more precisely: "And Ricimer died on 18 August" ("*et defunctus est Ricimer XV kl. Septemb.*").

The same source reports, "In this year Gundobad was appointed Patrician by the emperor Olybrius" ("*eo anno Gundobadus patricius factus ab Olybrio imp*." *Fast. vind. prior.*608). And Paul the Deacon likewise notes, "After the death of Ricimer, the emperor Olybrius appointed as Patrician Ricimer's nephew Gundobad" ("*mortuo Ricimere Olibrius imperator Gundibarum eius nepotem patricium effecit*": *Historia Roman*a 15.5).

The only indication of any policies of Olybrius is found on his coinage (see Kent, *RIC*), which was struck only in gold, at Rome and Milan. Milan struck only tremisses of the usual cross in wreath type. But the Roman solidi and tremisses broke with tradition. In the past, solidi had had legends such as *SALVS REIPUBLICAE* ("Salvation of the Republic") and *VICTORIA AVGGG* ("Victory of the Emperors"), and tremisses bore on the reverse a simple cross within a wreath without any legend. The solidi and tremisses of Olybrius struck at Rome, however, both bore a cross, which on the tremisses was sometimes jeweled, and the innovative legend *SALVS MUNDI* ("Salvation of the World"). This design is so novel that it must have been introduced at the specific command of Olybrius himself, and it surely is a reflection of his pious preoccupation with religious matters.

DEATH

Olybrius was the shortest lived of all the "shadow" emperors. John of Antioch reports,

"Olybrius survived only thirteen days after [Ricimer's death] and then, attacked by dropsy, he died, having been reckoned among the emperors for six months. Gundobad, Ricimer's nephew, succeeded to Ricimer's position and raised Glycerius, who had held the office of Count of the Domestics, to the throne" (*fr.* 209.2: Gordon trans., pp.122-123)

Other writers provide brief notices of Olybrius' death: Cassiodorus reported, "Olybrius departed from this life in the seventh month of his reign" ("*Olybrius autem VII imperii mense vitam peregit*": *Chron*. 1293); Ennodius noted, "At the very beginning of his reign he lived his last day" ("*in ipsis exordiis diem clausit extremum*": *Vita Epiphanii* 350); the *Paschale campanum* provided one specific date: "And Olybrius died on 2 November" ("*et Olybrius moritur IIII non. Novemb.*"); and the *Fasti vindobonenses priores* (no.609) provided another, "And the emperor Olybrius died at Rome on 22 October" ("*et defunctus est imp. Olybrius Romae X kl. Novemb*.").

These reports allow one to resolve the question of the timing of Olybrius' accession. Olybrius died either on 28 October (*Fast.vind.prior.*) or 2 November (*Paschale campanum*), in either the sixth (John of Antioch) or seventh (Cassiodorus, Marcellinus) month of his rule. This would put his accession in April, or early May at the very latest. But **Anthemius** was killed on 11 July. Olybrius, therefore, was named emperor by Ricimer a good two months or more before the death of **Anthemius**.

Bibliography:

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